

P.J. O'Rourke's Advice? 'Don't Vote'

by NPR STAFF

October 30, 2010

text size **A A A**

The very title of P.J. O'Rourke's new book will anger some people. Just wait until they actually read it. Host Scott Simon speaks with the author and humorist about *Don't Vote*, which looks at what O'Rourke considers to be the excesses of government.

Copyright © 2010 National Public Radio®. For personal, noncommercial use only. See Terms of Use. For other uses, prior permission required.

SCOTT SIMON, host:

The very title of P.J. O'Rourke's new book will anger some people. Well, wait until they actually read it. Mr. O'Rourke's new book is called "Don't Vote." P.J. O'Rourke, of course, is an author, satirist and humorist. He's also a fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. He writes regularly for the Atlantic and the Weekly Standard and has written numerous bestsellers, including "Give War a Chance" and "Parliament of Horrors." He's also a regular panelist on NPR's WAIT WAIT DON'T TELL ME and is reportedly the most quoted living man in "The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Humorous Quotations." P.J. O'Rourke joins us from New York. Thanks very much for being with us.

Mr. P.J. O'ROURKE (Author): Well, thank you for having me on the air.

SIMON: Could I get you to read the whole chapter on climate change?

Mr. O'ROURKE: And, folks, this won't take long. Climate change: there's not a damn thing you can do about it. Maybe climate change is a threat and maybe climate change has been tarted up by climatologists trolling for research grant cash. It doesn't matter. There are 1.3 billion people in China and they all want a Buick.

Actually, if you go more than a mile or two outside China's big cities, the wants are more basic. People want a hot plate and a piece of methane-emitting cow to cook on it. They want a carbon-belching moped and some CO2 disgorging heat in their houses in the winter. And air conditioning wouldn't be considered an imposition if you've ever been to China in the summer.

Now, I want you to dress yourself in sturdy clothing and arm yourself however you like - a stiff shot of gin would be my recommendation - and I want you to go tell 1.3 billion Chinese that they can never have a Buick. Then, assuming a Sierra Club helicopter has rescued you in time, I want you to go to tell a billion people in India the same thing.

SIMON: P.J. O'Rourke reading from his new book, "Don't Vote."

Chapter after chapter you enumerate ways in which you think there's just too much government. Is that fair to say?

Mr. O'ROURKE: Yes, I think it is, and it isn't really that I'm criticizing, you know, saying that there's too much government because Medicare's too expensive or too much government because of Social Security or welfare. It's simply a quantitative thing. If you ask the government to solve all of your problems, it's a bit like asking your wife to cook and clean, to raise the children, to hold down a second job to help with the

family finances, to keep her parents happy and well and keep your parents happy and well, and also to do the lawn and clean the gutters. And on top of all that, to be fetching, alluring and wearing something quite attractive when you come home from work at night and to have a pitcher of martinis in hand.

Now, I think any married man can tell you what will happen if you try that.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. O'ROURKE: It's just not going to work. And I feel we do that with the government. Government is a very powerful tool and it's tempting to use this tool to solve every one of our problems. But if we try to solve all of our problems with government, government gets a bit over-burdened.

SIMON: It's interesting, because obviously in the breath you talk about how democracy is a process whereby we establish these priorities of whats necessary year after year because they change. You point out that populism, which Ill refer to as for some people a heightened democracy, has been responsible for - I think I wrote it down: The perpetuation of slavery, the extermination of Native Americans, official segregation, anti-immigrant legislation.

You say that these were enterprises and movements that weren't carried out by a wealthy elite.

Mr. O'ROURKE: Well, no. They certainly weren't. They were populist sentiments. Now, on the other hand, let us not forget that the Civil Rights Movement was also a populist movement; that the Reconstruction Republicans, the radical Republicans after the Civil War; and abolitionism was a populist movement too.

Simply because something is a populist movement doesnt make it either good or bad. But one of the reasons that they created this elaborate and somewhat clumsy system - with all its checks and balances and oddball things, like the Electoral College and so on - was that our government should reflect the will of the people but not the whim of the people.

And you know, we've all - especially those of us who drink - have had whims. And we all know that they all shouldnt be acted upon.

SIMON: Can I get you to talk about how your thinking has changed over 40 years, as you suggested? I mean you were once, I think, didnt refer to yourself as a leftist hippy-loving "National Lampoon" satirist?

Mr. O'ROURKE: Actually - I'd straightened out quite a bit by the time I got to "National Lampoon."

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. O'ROURKE: But yes, I was raised in a very strict Republican family. Not so strict with me personally, but just strictly Republican. In fact, so Republican that I remember asking as a kid about 10, I asked my grandmother, a rock-rib Republican, downstate Illinois grandmother - whats the difference, Grandma, between Republicans and Democrats?

And she gave me an icy stare and she said: Democrats rent.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. O'ROURKE: That was it. So Im raised in this environment and I go off to college. And actually, I became a communist to meet girls. So I came home at Christmas with my hair down to my shoulders and a jean jacket with a big red fist on the back - you know, saying, you know, arise ye proletariat or whatever.

And my grandmother, the same they-rent grandmother, looks at me and she says: Pat, Im worried about

you. Are you becoming a Democrat?

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. O'ROURKE: I said, Democrat. Grandma, of course I'm not a Democrat. I'm a communist. And my grandmother paused and she said, Well, just as long as you're not a Democrat.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. O'ROURKE: And I never have been. I was a Republican and I was a communist and I'm a Republican again. I never have been a Democrat.

SIMON: P.J., I have to ask you. As one of America's foremost humorists, and you write about politics obviously a good deal - this book and others - what do you think of the Stewart and Colbert rallies taking place this weekend?

Mr. O'ROURKE: Well, as a longtime former resident of 15 years in Washington, I wish that everybody would stay off the Mall with their political cause so that we can get out there, you know, and play flag football or Frisbee or walk the dog or something. You know, which is, you know, what the National Mall should be for, in my personal opinion.

SIMON: P.J. O'Rourke, his new book is "Don't Vote."

Thank so much for being with us.

Mr. O'ROURKE: Thank you, Scott.

Copyright © 2010 National Public Radio®. All rights reserved. No quotes from the materials contained herein may be used in any media without attribution to National Public Radio. This transcript is provided for personal, noncommercial use only, pursuant to our Terms of Use. Any other use requires NPR's prior permission. Visit our permissions page for further information.

NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by a contractor for NPR, and accuracy and availability may vary. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Please be aware that the authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio.

comments

Please note that all comments must adhere to the NPR.org **discussion rules** and **terms of use**. See also the **Community FAQ**.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login / Register](#)

Post this comment to Facebook, too?

submit

NPR reserves the right to read on the air and/or publish on its Web site or in any medium now known or unknown the e-mails and letters that we receive. We may edit them for clarity or brevity and identify authors by name and location. For additional information, please consult our **Terms of Use**.